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ABSTRACT

Managerial communications are in ill health because of the conflict between employees and management caused by collective bargaining, the growing alienation between building-level administrators and central office personnel, the change in the relationship between the school and community manifest in parent and community pressure groups, and the disruption in relations with the media caused by the trend toward investigative reporting on the part of the media. There are three keys to correcting these problems. The first key is a different relationship between leadership and followership. The second is a deeper sense of commitment gained partly through revitalized upward messages from perceivers rather than senders. The third key is accountability that can generate confidence and restore faith in the educational process. (Author/IRT)

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PRESENTER: George B. Redfern

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For two years, I have had unusual opportunities to observe the status of managerial communications in school systems. I have worked in more than a dozen school districts in nine states. In some instances, the length of time has been four weeks; in others, two. In addition to these longer periods of contact, I have worked in three large city school systems for briefer periods. In these contacts, I have been able to get a fix on various aspects of interaction between and among superintendents, central office administrators and supervisors, principals, and teachers between schools, parents, the public and the media.

I have had the advantage of being an external third party and neutral in terms of relating to any particular category of personnel. This has given me a high degree of acceptance and privilege to share some of the thoughts, concerns, apprehensions, aspirations, and expectations of each group.

I cite these experiences in order to set the stage for assessing the current status of managerial communications in school systems, large and small.

The over-riding questions is: are managerial communications in good health? The short answer is no. They are rather sick. Here's the evidence.

First, there are major blockages in employer-employee communications. These are most pronounced where collective bargaining has become the dominant medium of communications between educational management and its employees.

There has been a phenomenal growth in employee organizations in the last ten years. NEA, AFT, AFSCME claim nearly 2.5 million members. In addition, there are more than 1200 local unions of school administrators.

Obviously, not all of NEA's members are actively engaged in collective bargaining, but the number is increasing as the power of the UNISERV arm reaches across the country.

USOE, in identifying seven issues regarded as critical for education in the next 5 to 10 years has this to say about teacher union growth:

> "A growing percentage of teachers will seek the benefits of union membership, including higher wages...Unions for push for more policy control and reform, and strikes will remain a significant problem. Merger of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association would create one of America's largest unions and give teachers a powerful bargaining position.[1]

1. "Trends in Education as Viewed by the USOE, "Phi Delta Kappan, October, 1976, p. 164.

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How has collective bargaining changed communication between boards of education, top educational managers and their employees?

Collaboration is replaced by adversary and confrontation tactics and strategies. Employees demand. Employers react and over-react. While compromise and consensus may be ultimate goals, the road to their achievement has lots of detours and obstacles.

A new vocabulary has emerged: demands and counter-demands, table tactics, caucuses, impasses, mediation, fact-finding and arbitration, strikes and work stoppages, lockouts, court orders, grievances and so goes the litany of adversary relationships. The negotiated contract becomes the bible of employer-employee relations. Communication becomes formalized and hard-nosed. Strategies and tactics are devised to outsmart and out-gun the opposition. Winning, at all costs, is the name of the game.

Strictures in communication result from collective bargaining. Openness and trust become casualties. Communication, in conventional terms, is fast fading.

A second aspect of difficulty in managerial communications is the growing alienation between building-level administrators and central office personnel. This deterioration in communication in managerial ranks is greater and more critical in large, complicated, bureaucratic systems.

Principals and other so-called middle-level administrators and supervisors have watched teachers bargain and gain at the negotiation table. Simultaneously, they feel squeezed and restricted so far as their management prerogatives, their compensation and fringe benefits are concerned. From a communications stand point, bargained contracts place restrictions upon the latitude of principals, in particular, to maange their schools and direct learning activities. Allegations of violations of negotiated contracts have multiplied with an escalation of grievances being filed. Building representatives not only become powerful advocates for teachers, but increasingly become the medium through which principal-teacher dialogue takes place at least in crucial matters. One outcome of these developments is the formation of managerial unions, to the dismay of boards of edducation and to the consternation of superintendents.

There is a further development that complicates managerial communications. This is a widening gap of easy working relationships between principals and top management. In working with school systems in the development of personnel evaluation programs, it has become increasingly apparent that there is a growing credibility gap between building level administrators and those to whom they look for direction and supervision.

As had been earlier stated, collective bargaining with teachers has been a partial cause of this disenchantment. Another contributing cause has been the inability to make the management team concept really work, Most school systems, if any size, allege they have an effective management team, yet there is a wide difference of opinion among principals and middle-level administrators as to the reality of its existence in any meaningful manner.

It may be that principals and others may hold unrealistic expectations as to what their roles should be on the team. At the same time, top managers may have equally unclear perceptions as to how the team should be constructed and what's its prerogatives could or should be.

The important point is, however, that there appears to be much dis-illusement and discontent about lines of communication between these components of management in school systems. I have observed a growing alienation among principals in particular.

This takes different forms and varies in intensity but, in the aggregate, adds up to escalating cynicism and dis-affection. This impairs managerial effectiveness. It complicates the overall administration of the educational process.

A third impairment of communications has emerged in community-school relations. Many linkages between the home and the classroom have grown tenuous. The unchallenged bonds of confidence that once existed between parent and teacher; between parent and principal can no longer be taken for granted. The reasons for these dissolutions are varied. The 1960's produced discontent among many Black parents, especially in cities, who felt schools were falling short in serving the needs of their children. Low academic achievement, social maladjustment, and difficulties stemming from desegregation-re-segregation problems decreased confidence levels of these parents.

Parent and community pressure groups, spanning the spectrum from ultra-conservative to extreme liberal persuasions, complained that schools were being unresponsive to their particular concerns. Expectations were cast in the form of demands and school personnel, often, went on the defensive. Meaningful communication became blocked and, to a large extent, has continued so.

In recent months, parent advocacy groups have emerged. Their agenda call for a much greater voice in determining what schools should teach, how educational services shall be delivered, and how teachers and administrators will be held accountable for their performance.

Fortunately, the alienation of parent-community support is not uniform nor totally widespread throughout the country. Its prevalence and intensity, however, are sufficiently significant to cause concern.

Understanding causes and finding ways to reverse these tendencies will require both insight and skill beyond that which has been used so far by teachers and administrators.

There is one more aspect of communications that has come to be a real challenge to boards of education, superintendents, and school administrators in general. This is the change in communications between schools,

the press, and electronic media.

News reporters and their radio and TV counterparts are increasingly choosing to engage in investigative reporting. Perhaps, Woodward and Bernstein Watergate successes have encouraged local school reporters to choose this approach to covering school news.

The point is that many educational administrators have not been able to cope with this kind of aggressive media coverage and in trying to do so have been made to seem inept, defensive, and untrustworthy.

Aggressive investigative reporting tends to undermine confidence in the integrity and competence of educational managers. It becomes fashionable to believe that there are always hidden agenda and but for the tireless investigative reporter, parents and public are destined to be kept in the dark and ill-informed about their schools.

These four types of communication linkages are in varying degrees of disarray. The question is, what can be done about it. Are there some keys to effectiveness that can be used to make managerial communications more viable?

Being aware of the fact that it is much easier to define a problem than to correct it, I offer, with trepidation, the following suggestions.

Insofar as two of the communication channels are concerned: (a) relationships between employees and employee, and (b) between top and middle administrators, the problem is less impaired communications and more low commitment. Poor communication is a symptom. Low commitment is likely the underlying cause of strained relationships.

Many administrators believe that commitment can be created by their own actions. So they set up PR departments and allocate sizeable budgets to generate downward communication. Yet, results are disappointing. Why? Commitment is a natural psychological need. In our efforts to generate it, we frustrate and retard it at the source by assumptions and practices which are erroneous.

We hire, assign, supervise, promote, transfer, set pay scales, write rules and regulations, retire and terminate employees. In doing so, we exercise power over employees. It is less the exercise of this power, however, than the concept of power itself that lessens commitment.

The concept of power divides employees into two groups with divergent interests. The school system, under the direction of its superintendent, represents the board of education and has one set of interests. These very often are perceived by those below the superintendent level as opposite to their own interests.

Power to employees is clearly the distinguishing quality between the organization and themselves. The organization has power. They do not. Their reactions are often ambivalent. On the one hand, they resent it when the school system seems unresponsive. Frustration and impotence generate resentment and hostility. This can, especially in certain situations, do harm to the school system itself.

On the other hand, most employees do not question the right of the school system to exercise reasonable power. Not to do so, could result in lack of order and discipline, perhaps even, chaos. These results would not be in the best interests of the employee either.

So, while employees accept the organization's right to exercise power, they -- at the same time -- sense unpleasant implications. They often adopt a "them and us" -- even "them and me" -- complex. They perceive themselves as excluded subordinates. The right of access is believed to be cut off. And, it should be remembered that the right of access is everything!

What really is the source of power? One source is economic. As an employee, it is necessary either to conform to the mandates of the job or risk undesirable consequences -- penalties or even loss of employment.

Another source of power has nothing to do with organizational mandates. It derives, instead, from the work ethic. As employees, we hold certain work values. Having a job is good. Hard work has its rewards. Cooperation is desirable. Loyalty is a worthy attribute. Obeying reasonable rules can be satisfying, etc. In short, employees do what the school system wants not solely because they fear job loss. They conform because they do not want to be traitors to their own value systems. So, in a very large sense, they themselves are the source of the power of the school system with which they are identified.

The question is: what is happening to these two sources of power? Economic power which the organization can exercise is becoming more and more impotent. Legislation, court decisions, and employee organization - through collective bargaining - are circumscribing economic power. Terminations are subject to review through due process mechanisms. Promotions are affected by seniority rights. Compensation is bargained. Management prerogatives are becoming more and more diluted.

Even the work ethnic is coming under scrutiny. Having a job is good, but not just any job. Hard work is good, but not necessarily in and of itself. Making money is good, but how it is made is more important. Sacrifice for home and family is good, but doing one's own thing is also important. Loyalty is good, but it has to be a worthy cause in which to invest one's commitment. And so on. Given these conditions, what are the first two keys to effectiveness in managerial communications?

The first key is a different relationship between leadership and followership. Why is followership a prerequisite for commitment? The individual has to buy into the purpose of the school system. Leadership without well articulated purposes which reflect the needs of both the employer and the employee or the middle-level administrator and the top level managers has no meaning.

What creates in an individual the desire to follow a leader? The key is that each of us is always striving to meet our own pyschological needs. What top managers must do is to enable individuals to satisfy their own needs. Enlightened leadership takes the place of organizational

power. When power is thus replaced, by leadership, employees tend to view managerial actions differently. They are perceived to be less self-serving. Common purposes become evident. Enlistment in the purposes of the school system becomes compatible with individual interests. This is a prerequisite to the second key to greater effectiveness in managerial communications.

The second key, not surprisingly, is commitment itself. This is where communication becomes critical. It is the lifeline of commitment. When the individuals cannot communicate upward, they conclude that the organization and its managers do not care what they think. This turns them off. Cyncism results.

Unfortunately, the purposes of the school system may not be to achieve genuine understanding, but to get the work done. Work is accomplished through a system of policies, regulations, and power flowing through linear pathways and with a one person-one boss structure. Communication is used as a pipleline for power and authority. Decisions, ideas, policies, procedures, and instructions flow downward easily. Communication upward, however, comes hard. Every supervisor or administrator is a potential terminus. Each must say "yes" for an idea or a suggestion to survive. If upward communication fails, commitment dies.

Though administrators profess interest in upward communication and even establish ways for it to flow, results are disappointing. It takes more than good intentions. Employees must be able to see dividends from their ideas and suggestions. If commitment to the purposes and programs of the school system is to flower and flourish, upward communication must be genuine and sustained.

Peter Drucker explains why downward communications cannot work. He says:

> "....For centuries we have attempted communications 'downward.' This, however, cannot work no matter how hard and how intelligently we try. It cannot work, first, because it focuses on what we want to say. It assumes, in other words, that the utterer communicates. But, we know that all he does is utter. Communications is the act of the recipient. What we have been trying to do is to work on the emitter, specifically, the manager, the administrator, the commander to make him capable of being a better communicator. But, all one can communicate downward are commands, that is, pre-arranged signals. One cannot communicate downward anything connected with understanding, let alone with motivation. This requires communication upward from those who perceive to those who want to reach their perceptions..."[2]

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2 Peter F. Drucker, Management - Tasks - Responsibilities - Practices, Harper and Row, Publisher, New York: 1974 p.

The implications of Peter Drucker's insights into the esence of genuine cc munication are clear. All of us profess the need to improve managerial communications in schools, but the problem is not that communications are inadequate. It may be, in fact, that they already may be too explicit, but in the wrong direction. When individuals sense they are being used, they automatically see management's messages as manipulation. When this happens, they will resist, no matter how clear the type, or slick the brochure or clever the copy.

So, upward messages become the essence of genuine commitment - one of the three keys to better managerial communications - and a means of its improvement.

So, here are two keys to better managerial communications; first, a new meaning of followership and secondly, a deeper sense of commitment, gained partly through re-vitalized upward messages from perceivers rather than senders.

We come now to the third key. Hopefully, it will fit two locks. First, to open up blockages in communication between schools and their communities and secondly, between school systems and the media. In a real sense, these are dual channels of the same stream.

There is no best label for this key. The nearest single term that describes it is the word accountability.

One often hears it said that in former times, parents and patrons had consummate confidence in their schools. Teachers and administrators seem to have had an unlimited bank account of credibility upon which to draw. The level of confidence between home and school was almost limitless. It may have been that, in former times, such complete trust in the effectiveness of educational services was a bit unhealthy because it was so unquestioning. Be that as it may, times have eroded that confidence so that in its place have emerged a growing skepticism, increased doubts, and sometimes hard criticism.

School systems, recognizing this growing erosion, have attacked the problem with stepped-up conventional PR tools. This sometimes helps, but in many instances, the desired results fall short of expectations.

Credibility has to be earned in different ways. Parent and patron confidence has to be achieved differently. Schools through their agents (teachers/administrators/supervisors) must re-vitalize their techniques for enabling the clients they serve to communicate their expectations, their aspirations, and their needs. Admittedly, the articulation of these client-centered perceptions may be unclear and perhaps, at times, conflicting. It may, in fact, be difficult to be truly responsive to divergent expectations of parents and patrons. Yet, educational services must be carefully blended to meet the needs of clients and what professional practitioners believe are educationally sound.

The truth is that local schools must hold themselves accountable by responding to three drumbeats; namely, (a) client concerns, (b) system-wide goals and objectives, and (c) teacher/administrator/supervisor insights and judgments. This requires coordinated planning based upon shared goals, objectives, and strategies. But, most of all, credibility comes only when

parent/patron interests are meshed with those of professional educators. When this happens, accountability becomes more than a cliche.

Accountability, in the fullest sense, produces credibility; credibility generates confidence and confidence restores faith in the educational process. Thus, the key to building better communication between school and community is the kind of accountability that opens up the local school to the bright light of scrutiny - a kind of self-initiated accessibility built on openness and which assures avenues of access that focuses on the products of our educational services. Information is not packaged; outward communication is not managed in the conventional sense. Educators must become committed to accountability so that it may become the best key to restore school-community confidence and mutual trust.

In a larger sense, this is the same key to built a more effective relationship between the media and the school district as a whole.

It is naive to yearn for reporters of either the printed or electronic media to quit being investigative in their coverage of the school beat. The more school systems "beef up" the outward flow of information, the greater the zeal of reporters to stress investigative coverage.

What is likely to be more effective is a different approach by school officials. Greater dividends will result from initiating and pursuing a policy of self-initiated accessibility.

Leon M. Lessinger, Dean of the College of Education of the University of South Carolina and J. A. Perkins, Jr., of Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co., Washington D.C. offer some very useful insights as to one way to bring about this kind of accountability and perhaps bring about a new relationship between schools and the media. In a provocative paper on "accountability in our schools." they have this to say about communication:

> "....Many school districts in the U.S. currently communicate well with their patrons; however, many do not. Formalized methods of communicating between the district and the community are essential. In the simplest terms, taxpayers wish to know the following:
>
> - o What needs are you trying to meet?
> - o What programs are run to meet these needs?
> - o What corrective action is being taken regarding failures?
> - o What are the costs of the programs?
>
> With this type of information, provided on a regular basis, the community can make informed decisions. The records show that, where this action is on-going, the community usually provides adequate resources for the school system to do its job. The records also shows that where the community is not informed, it usually either withdraws or threatens to withdraw financial

support. Good public communication is an essential condition if accountability is to be successful...."[3]

An external audit of educational accountability, such as external audits of educational financial and business affairs - as proposed by Lessinger and Perkins - would do a great deal to make accountability more of a real than a theoretical concept. If this were generally true, the need for investigative reporting might be lessened and school system-media relationships may be enhanced.

Enthusiastic followership, renewed commitment, and more meaningful accountability - three keys to better managerial communications - are achievable. Whether they can become fait accompli rests with you in this room and your counterparts throughout the country.

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3. From a paper by Leon M. Lessinger and J. A. Perkins, Jr., "Accountability in Our Schools - The Concept - The System - The Contents." pp. 17-18.